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# Family mugs

Erin Zellefrow

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

FAMILY MUGS  
by  
Erin Zellefrow  
September 2010

## CONTENTS

Thesis Approval. . . . .	3
Thesis Reproduction Approval Statement. . . . .	4
List of General Illustrations. . . . .	5
List of Thesis Work Illustrations. . . . .	6

## SECTIONS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

• Abstract. . . . .	7
• Original thesis proposal. . . . .	8
• Additional statements on the goals and objectives of the thesis. . . . .	10

### 2. CONTENT

#### i Body of Document

• Personal Background. . . . .	11
• Process and Concept. . . . .	12
• Discussion of Influential Artists. . . . .	25
• The Body of Work. . . . .	32
• Conclusion. . . . .	40
• Bibliography. . . . .	42
• Image Use Written Permission. . . . .	43

## Thesis Approval

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## GENERAL ILLUSTRATIONS

-Figure/Page-

-1/14- *School Photograph*. With the permission of the Phelps Family

-2/27- *Nan Goldin*. “Lil Laughing, Swampscott, MA” 1996 ARTstor Collections

-3/28- *Nan Goldin*. “Gina at Bruce’s Dinner Party, NYC” 1991 ARTstor Collections

-4/29- *Nan Goldin*. “Guido with his mother, grandmother and shadow, Turin” 1999  
ARTstor Collections

-5/30- *The Miss Rockaway Armada*. Installation at MASS MoCA, With the permission of  
Tod Seelie

-6/31- *The Miss Rockaway Armada*. Installation at MASS MoCA, With the permission of  
Tod Seelie

## ILLUSTRATIONS OF THESIS WORK

-Figure/Page-

- 1/17- "Judy" -2008, Acrylic & Pencil on Canvas, 3'h x 4'w
- 2/19- "Jimmy"- 2008, Cast Iron, Paint, Rust and Yarn, 10"h x 7"w x 3"d
- 3/20- "Jean Glass"-2009, Cast Glass, Paint, 5 ½"h x 4 ½" w x 1"d
- 4/21- "Doris"- 2009, Acrylic, Pencil, 3.4'h x 5'w
- 5/24- Portion of Installation- 2009, Vern, Sue, Ed, Michael, Color Installation, Jimmy
- 6/32- Detail of Color Installation-2009, Paper and Pins
- 6/33- Portion of Installation- 2009, Jim and Jean
- 7/34- Portion of Installation- 2009 Jean, Color Installation, Doris, Michael Glass
- 8/35- "Michael Glass" -2009, Cast Glass, Paint, and Yarn, 7"h x 5"w x 2"d
- 9/36- Portion of Installation- 2009, Doris, Michael Glass, Vern, Sue
- 10/36- "Sue"-2008, Cast Iron, Paint, Rust, and Yarn, 6"h x 5"w x 2 ½"d
- 11/37- Portion of Installation-2009, Ed and Michael
- 12/37- Portion of Installation- 2009, Vern, Sue, Ed, Michael, Color Installation, Jimmy
- 13/38- Portion of Installation- 2009, Doris, Michael Glass, Vern, Sue, Ed, Michael,  
Color Installation, Jimmy, Judy, John, Jean Glass
- 14/39- Portion of Installation- 2009, Jean Glass and Mike

## *ABSTRACT*

*Family Mugs* is a Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts. *Family Mugs* by Erin Zellefrow is a formal documentation of artwork, conceptual thought process, and technical skills used to facilitate the creation of MFA thesis work and its successive gallery installation. It additionally reviews the artist's personal background, and artist influences that informed and drove the final body of work.

Depicted in *Family Mugs* is the artist's deeply personal process of examining fleeting memories of childhood and departed loved ones. Zellefrow struggles to reclaim these lost faces and places through acrylic portraits, iron cast busts, and glass cast busts taken from the likenesses of strangers. The resulting invented family unit was arranged in a household environment installation.

*Family Mugs* explores and recounts the struggle to reclaim and rebuild faded memories and lost loves ones. It embraces the beautiful, fragile, awkward and fleeting states that are the result of these efforts.

### *ORIGINAL THESIS PROPOSAL*

For my thesis, I want to explore the history of my life, while connecting and comparing it to the lives of others. I am interested in my own memories, and the people and places that make up those memories. I have strong feelings of loss or disappearance as I grow older and lose those places and people who make up my life. I have a deep interest in creating a remembrance of loved ones, but not specifically my own. Rather, I choose people I have no emotional attachments to and can therefore have the freedom to alter and invent their forms. I would like to depict these people as if from the eyes of their loved ones, seeing them in their beautiful, fragile, awkward, and fleeting states, not creating a perfect version of my source models, but the most exposed and sensitive depiction.

I will achieve this by producing a series of paintings and sculptures using found photographs as the source images, which will be combined into a multi-media installation. The paintings will be individual and family portraits and the sculptures will be cast iron bust portraits. After completing all pieces, I will then arrange them creating patterns and constructing a space filled with these “relics”, in effect, a new family environment. I will take care to organize and obsess over this arrangement to further express feelings of love towards the portraits. All of these multiple parts will come together to create an environment that expresses feelings of both familiarity and awkwardness.

Many of the artists who influence me use similar imagery, themes or processes. Some of these specifically being themes of family, household, women's work, and processes using found objects, obsession and repetition. The two artists whom I connect most deeply with are Liza Lou and Nan Goldin. Liza Lou is an artist I admire for her obsessive process and installations commenting on the household and women's work. Nan Goldin's photographs depict the raw beauty in the lives around her and are deeply personal representations of so many states of human emotion, life, and relationships. I am interested in looking to these two artists, along with others to aid my process and concepts, and to help find my place within a broad art history context.

In my thesis work, some parts will be firm, concrete, and understandable, while other parts fade or disappear similar to memories, which can be focused and hazy at the same time. That is what the results of this exploration will essentially be for me, moments from memories.

*ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS ON GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:*

My original thesis goals were to pay homage to my loved ones; discover clues to their disappearance, create a place that resembled the environment of their prime and let them exist in this space with other loved ones once more. When setting out to create my thesis body of work, I held close to my heart the desire to delve into a personal history of myself, my loved ones, and to rekindle the memories I still retain of this history. I knew to do this, I must start with simple, concrete elements that would not falter or become unclear during my extensive process. This is where the use of my family's first names came into play. It was necessary for me to build upon one basic foundation I knew to be a true identifier of a person, and then elaborate, invent and reconstruct from there. Similar to this, simple elements of solid color and household reference from my memories were clear imagery I knew to be ideal for visually filling my installation space. Though founded from these basic elements, the conceptual issues I delved into during my thesis process were complex and emotional.

The final thesis work I produced is extremely meaningful personally. I gained a deeper understanding of myself, my loved ones, and the process of grieving. Through my in-depth exploration of the dissipated, I was able to mourn my losses and come to terms with reality. Though this process is meant to facilitate nostalgia and healing for myself alone, I do hope the viewer is able to have their own appreciation of the work through remembrance of their personal relationships.

## CONTENT

### *PERSONAL BACKGROUND:*

I constantly think, talk, and create artwork about my childhood and the experiences, emotions and physical surroundings that comprised that childhood. It was composed of people whom cared, challenged and supported me, and consisted of familiar places that had colors, textures and smells that I still glimpse moments of today.

“Faces, in our first seconds of consciousness stare back at us: parents, loved ones, attendants to our advent.” <sup>1</sup>

The faces and places of my childhood are gone, and it is incredibly hard for me to cope with this reality. I have not been able to grieve properly since I do not fully understand the process of this loss, and there is no closure without answers. I long to reclaim moments of which I only have brief images of in my mind. I want to be cradled in the arms I once was. It is not always about those people being deceased, some of those loved ones are still with me and close to me today, but not always in the same form or likeness. People change, physically, mentally, and emotionally. These memories are so beautiful, fragile, and raw. There is almost no way to materialize them in real life. But it is something I cannot stop myself from trying to do. How can I comfort myself? How can I pull those memories of loved ones and lost places out of my mind and make them more

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<sup>1</sup> Warhol, Andy. Narcissism: Artists Narcissism Reflects Themselves. Forward by Reeseey Shaw. California Center for the Arts Museum, 1996



permanent, to be able to stand face to face with them for longer than my mind allows me? For me, the way is to reinvent and recreate loved ones physiognomy and the environments of my memories.

*PROCESS AND CONCEPT:*

The process I have devised for myself is in ways a relishing of others lives to recreate my own. I spend hours scrolling through websites of random strangers looking for personal photographs. To find these strangers I use Internet search engines to do image searches using the date 1973 paired with the name of one of my own family members. I use the year 73 because it is exactly a decade before my birth, and seeing the number three gives me a feeling of comfort since it is a number I have written my whole life in connection with documenting my own existence. The reason I refrain from using 1983, the year of my birth as a key word is because I have found that the images taken from the seventies have a certain aesthetic that is directly related to my memories. I have a fondness for the style of the time and I feel it has to do with how the photos are aged, the saturation of colors, and the style of clothing, furniture and architecture. When I was born in 1983, my family had many home furnishing left over from the 70's, which I grew up seeing through my infant eyes. This era's iconic modernism and usage of materials such as plastic, wood paneling, brick walls and facades, shag carpet, bold patterning, and strong colors are easily recognizable and relatable to the general public as 70's Americana. By using photographs and elements of interiors from this time as inspiration, I am able to depict my vision of nostalgia to others.

“We are not born with a notion of the object as a distinct entity, existing and moving in a spatial field; such a notion is built up during the first two years of life by processes of discrimination, association, and selection<sup>2</sup>. Out of the original chaotic experience of vastness (to use William James’s phrase) the infant constructs real space, and this construction involves several subordinate processes that are gradually co-ordinated.”<sup>3</sup>

All of the surroundings of my infancy, these remnants of the 70’s, I used to begin formulating an understanding of my world. Once I have found another family’s photographs resulting from my search, I scroll through the images until I find one that applies to my own aesthetic. Sometimes a site is a dud. Other times I come across sites I can view for hours. Most of the sites I find are family websites filled with photographs, which are meant to be shared only with their own family members. Some sites are set up in homage of the deceased, others are high school or club sites posting memories for members or graduates. The process of looking through these family websites brings me a wave of the same emotions I feel when I am experiencing snippets of my own childhood memories. I see the entirety of their lives pass before my eyes, and I love it. When I find an image I really enjoy, I save it into the appropriate file. For example, if my search consisted of Cathy 1973, I take whatever images I have found from that search and save them in a desktop folder named Cathy. The action begins impersonal and develops into something deeply personal for me. I have no attachment to these people, yet I develop

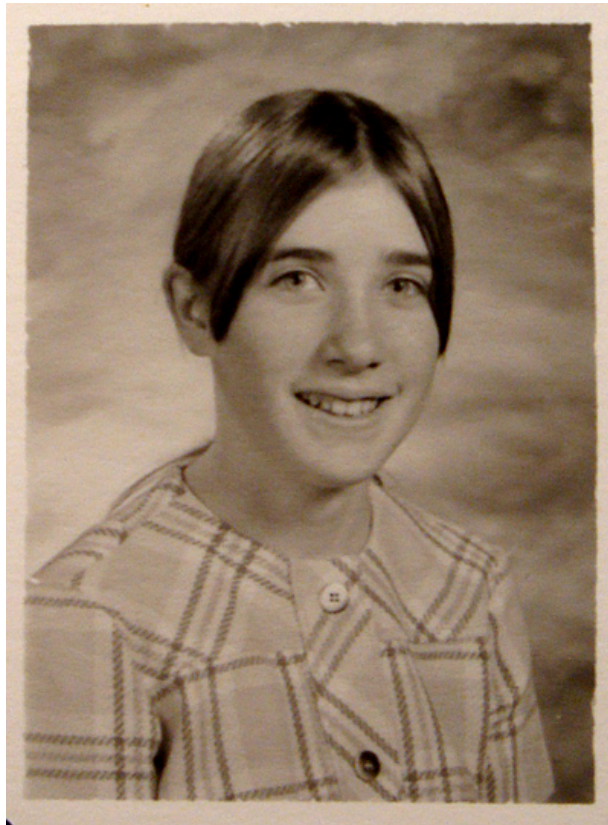
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<sup>2</sup> These processes have been observed in great detail by Jean Piaget. CF. especially *La Construction du réel chez l’enfant* (Neuchâtel and Paris, 1937; tr. Margaret, From - Read, Herbert. The Art of Sculpture. New York, N.Y. Pantheon Books, 1956

<sup>3</sup> Read, Herbert. The Art of Sculpture. New York, N.Y. Pantheon Books, 1956

one through spending time with their personal photo albums. It is my own invented, unforced attachment. These are people I can keep myself distant from, and this distance allows me to invent my own words and stories for their images. I take those images and turn them into my own newly fabricated memory.

I often choose the photographs I do because the people in them already have quirky, awkward or imperfect elements that I find attractive. I liken it to the inherent unconditional love family gives to one another, no matter what lies on the surface. To me, using these imperfect source individuals makes it easier for me to bond with the strangers. They are normal people and not the ideal supermodel celebrities that are common imagery in today's world. These are real everyday flawed humans.



I cannot paint my own family. I have tried and it has never worked successfully. It is too personal, I know exactly how they look and, therefore, I give myself no leeway to alter their figures. It would become blasphemous for me to even try, as if I were doing my loved ones a dishonor. It is also too frustrating of a process because my vision of them never translates perfectly into the work. Instead, by using these strangers I am allowed the flexibility to take their image and already inherently appealing qualities, and alter them in any way necessary for my work. As I paint, I begin to see parts of their figures transform, reassemble, and take on the familiar likeness of my own family. I develop relationships with these new family members I am building. I am saddened by my grandfather's eyes that emerge, or I smile at the awkward teeth of an aunt. I see myself in them, not only through the characteristics of my family, but also by seeing my own fragility, translucently, and lack of foresight into my own future. They remind me that I will, in time change and fade into an unclear environment.

When I start working on a painting, I begin by taking a look at the color I have laid down on the canvas. Usually this color is meaningful to me because it also stems from a snippet of memory. I then open up all of my named folders and look through my research until I find a photograph that is right. A photograph that seems fitting for the canvas, for the color I have primed and the mood I am in. I start by doing a pencil sketch onto the canvas, but very quickly I become impatient and start mixing acrylic paint. I keep my palette very limited, usually only using a palette of white, yellow oxide, cadmium red, cerulean bleu and ultramarine blue. I mix a skin tone that feels

complementary to the background. Sometimes I use more of a pink tone, other times it can be very yellow. It all depends on how the background and flesh act together once I put down the first layer of skin. I try to lay the color down very lightly and tend to be drawn towards the highlights at first. This can get me into trouble because, if I put too much focus on these highlights from the beginning, I end up doing a lot of layering later to achieve the true highlights and in the long run everything becomes much more opaque. I paint the flesh and after I hit my main areas I begin to mix in more color. I only add a tiny bit at a time, just gradually building the flesh up. This is subtle and hardly readable in many of my pieces, but that slight change, appearing flat to the passing eye, is something I needed instead of having one solid color. Again, I begin to become impatient and yearn to throw in dark shadows. Normally, I cannot hold this off for too long and end up mixing a brown-blue color for chiaroscuro. I start with the eyes; I have an ingrained need to put the depth there first. This is what really begins to make me bond with the painting. After hitting a few areas with shadow I tend to realize I have jumped around too much and then revert back to the pencil to help regain understanding of the piece as a whole. The pencil really does serve that specific function of clarification for me. It becomes a clear understandable frame that gives the figure structure when I am feeling lost by the paint. The line has a strong quality to it while still being attenuated, which keeps the work as a whole in balance. This balance and the looseness I tend to feel with the paint is what ends up allowing me to find the in-between/ fluxing state that most of my paintings have. I love the blurred, translucent, fuzzy state of the paintings, while the figures are still capable of revealing their clarity. My memories are similar, planes of

color and fuzz that give way to apparitions.



The iron sculptures start in the same way as the paintings. I do the same research, but for sculpting, I print out multiple black and white photos instead of working from the computer. I take these copies and when I begin to work I look through them until I find a photo that feels instinctively right at that moment of inception. I sculpt with clay and build up a relief bust. This bust usually takes me two or three spans of time working before it is complete. Once the clay bust is finished, I then make a silicone mold of the model and pour wax into this mold. I make additional alterations to the wax, which includes carving a shelf into the back of the bust that will be used to provide support for wall mounting when the piece is completed. I then make a ceramic shell mold around the

wax and once dried, melt the wax out so that molten iron can be poured into the evacuated shell. The only step I feel remains similar with my painting work, besides the research, is the process of sculpting. This is because my need to work quickly and then step away stays consistent. The rest of the steps involved in creating the finished piece can be comforting because of their straightforward nature, but they distance me from the actual work. It becomes hard for me to relate to the piece until it is finally in its finished iron form. Out of all the steps leading to the finished product, the one in which I tend to have the most negative feelings towards “in progress” is the wax stage. Once the process of casting is completed, I cut, clean, sandblast, and paint the entire iron figure with glossy white spray-paint. I go further into surface alteration and pull away areas of spray-paint to give the face depth and shadows. I rust the exposed iron with an application of salt water to achieve a beautiful play between the hue of iron oxide decay and gloss white. While fabricating the sculpture, I simultaneously crocheted panels of gray yarn that go behind the iron busts. I pair the iron busts and crocheted blankets together because I delight in the beauty of the iron in contrast with the soft yarn, and enjoy the subtle depth the single stitch pattern gives against the iron’s relief. Each blanket is given a white tag in the bottom left corner. The tag speaks of ownership, yet lacks solid identification. Even in the way the tag is hand stitched to the blanket is purposeful, showing that someone cared enough to label this blanket, to set the stage for the owners name to be hand stitched on. But nothing has been followed through, the tag is left void and denies identifying its owner. These ghostly white busts, with their flesh deteriorating, are nameless in their loved, yet forgotten, existence. They are not hyper-reflective polished,



metal surfaces to mirror others in their faces. They are, instead, a once milky-white, porcelain-skinned loved-ones, who are now yellowing and deteriorating, like memories themselves.



My glass busts are constructed exactly the same as the iron casts, up until the wax step. For this process, once I have completed a wax model I build a plaster silica mold around the wax bust. I then steam out the wax and pack this mold with glass. The glass-packed mold goes into a kiln which is fired, during this process the glass melts and fills in the mold. I take this mold out of the kiln, break out the glass bust, and then cold work the



piece to grind down edges and imperfections. After completing the cold working, I then sandblast the glass to give the surface a tooth for paint to adhere to. I use a combination of spray paint and oil paint on the glass. I tend to use the spray paint sparingly, unlike on the iron, to keep the translucent quality of the glass somewhat apparent. I then go in with oil paint, using only a mixture of burnt umber and yellow oxide in a similar fashion as the rust on the iron busts to add depth and contrast to the face. All of the glasswork is displayed on white shelves with a jagged icicle edged façade. This white shelf reminds me of the white shelf that existed in my childhood bedroom. It is an element of comfort I use for personalizing my invented family. The shelving is not just a random functional



display object; it ties into my past and gives me the remembrance I am looking to surround myself with, and can now apply to the loved ones I am creating.

In the processes of creating all of my pieces, I tend to work in surges of production. I will sit down and sometimes in under a half an hour have built up a piece very quickly. But, I then have to step away and do something different, or leave the studio completely. It is during this time away from touching my tools that I think about the work or look at it from different perspectives. I feel it is the time not physically working, but observing and thinking, even if not consciously, that I determine the next steps for the piece. That way, the next time I do sit down I begin to work very quickly with a full understanding of what actions I need to take to facilitate progress on the work. Taking this time away lessens my frustration and prevents me from overworking the piece. It is easy for me to decide when the work is finished, but often difficult for me to explain why.



This inherent sense of completion relates back to the source of inspiration; my memories.

When I look at the painting and it triggers the same feelings that I get when having those memories, I instinctively know it is done. To anyone else it may not look complete, but when I can sense its animism, I know it is finished.

When installing the work I knew bringing all the pieces together to create an installation would be very personal and time consuming. I realized that the paintings and sculptures could not simply be displayed on white walls. To me they are more than just objects designed to stand alone in a gallery. I had a deep need to give them their own space and make them feel at home because I care about them as loved ones and desire their treatment to be reflective of this. The work depended on me to organize and find a fitting place in my “home” environment that specifically related to home environments of my youth. I constructed a temporary wall in the gallery, which closed off a part of the large open warehouse environment. While the room still remained an open space, it took on the feeling of a more personal habitat. The walls were painted a dark gray with faux wood paneling coming up four feet in height and finished with a natural wood chair rail. This made for a dark environment that still maintained warmth, even in the midst of an overwhelmingly cold and sterile warehouse. After constructing the room, it was time for me to begin to bond with the space and arrange my “family” in a natural and comforting way. It was a dramatic and instinctive back and forth to find the right relationships in this arrangement. There were so many elements to consider: the relationship between pieces, between mediums, between names, and between faces. I did not care so much about the proximity of individual works or having perfectly spaced out paintings and

sculptures. What became apparent was my need to organize the family based on figure orientation and pose. Going from left to right, I tended to pair two figures looking right with two figures looking left to create a vortex back outward towards the viewer. In my mind the one who needed that attention coming out from the work was myself. This orientation of the family demanded that their eye contact move the viewer around the space.

After taking days to arrange my “family” in their environment, I began to place color installations in areas of the room. These color installations are made up of individual square color samples that I chose specifically from hardware stores. After collecting thousands of these samples, I would lay them out and begin to stick them onto the wall one by one with yellow sewing pins. As the piece grew, it developed naturally because I carefully chose what colors belonged next to one another. This growing “wallpaper” was made up of snippets of colors special to me because they are vivid in my memories. Its pattern crept along the wall and became another decorative element of my space, my own personalized wallpaper with colors pulsing and yellow pinheads floating.

In the work, I wanted to capture memories of loved ones that I may have lost, and bring them back through my own hand, by sculpting and painting.

“Portraits cheat death, and have the lure of immortalizing the sitter.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mullins, Charlotte. Painting People : Figure Painting Today. New York, NY. D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2006

In doing this, I attempted to surround myself with a never changing, never leaving family.

“The primitive sculptor works with the knowledge that he is creating, not a lifeless object, but a living form.”<sup>5</sup>

The installation I created was a place for my family to constantly exist in a permanent way.



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<sup>5</sup> Read, Herbert. The Art of Sculpture. New York, N.Y. Bollingen Foundation, 1956

## *DISCUSSION OF INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS*

During the course of creating my thesis work and in the time spent reflecting on the end results, there were certain artists that I looked to and took inspiration from. Their work was instrumental in helping me understand how to depict figure and family.

### *Mari Sunna*

Artist Mari Sunna's paintings consist of atmospheric backgrounds that set the scene for her abstracted and ghostly figures. Sunna's subjects are transient figures that exist in a state of loneliness. Because of their abstracted nature, they are not striving to be a realistic or ideal portrait.

"She does not dwell on similarity but on aura as the intrinsic analogy of humanity."<sup>6</sup>

In the painting *Pass*, a black haired and likely female figure is framed from the shoulders up in front of a light gray background. Her face is a cool pale white pink surface that ripples into blue gray tones on her right cheek. Across from this and set off to her left is one dark grey sorrowful circle of an eye. The figure is still, her mass of black hair solidifying her place. In this piece, the soft trembling skin giving way to harsh lines speaks to me of how ones understanding and depiction of another human can be subjective. It is the emotion behind the figure that shines through in Sunna's work. I admire the gaps left to be filled in with ones own understanding, and relate this to my

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<sup>6</sup> Sunna, Mari. Mari Sunna, ichduersiees. Bielefeld : Kerber, 2008

own wavering line qualities and love of the awkward tension. Her work has such a profound blurred quality of a memory that I embrace in my own work.

“As if they were an image from memory, they have become fused together, faces a smudgy blur, movements compressed into one image. These works operate like memories of loved ones – so palpable as to be almost real, and yet already fragmented and disappearing from view.”<sup>7</sup>

Like myself, Sunna gives first names to her portraits. “I title them, because I want to give them personality, baptize them.”<sup>8</sup> This sensitivity and gestures of relationship she shows towards her haunting figures are qualities I admire.

### *Nan Goldin*

I first became interested in artist Nan Goldin’s work after viewing her book of photography titled *I’ll Be Your Mirror*. I was immediately drawn to her use of color and striking ability to capture her subjects in a raw and honest way. As a child Nan lost her older sister to suicide and from that point on she began documenting everyday moments and people in her life. By doing this Nan sought to insure that she would never again risk memories of her loved ones fading.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mullins, Charlotte. Painting People : Figure Painting Today. New York, NY. D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Sunna, Mari. Mari Sunna, ichduersiees. Bielefeld : Kerber, 2008

<sup>9</sup> Sussman, Elisabeth. Nan Goldin : I’ll Be Your Mirror. New York, NY. Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996



"My work does come from the snapshot. It's the form of photography that is most defined by love. People take them out of love, and they take them to remember – people, places, and times. They're about creating a history by recording a history."<sup>10</sup>

Part of my attraction to Nan's work is due to her use of color. Her bold and saturated images have a quality that reminds me of aged photographs. Some part of her photos may appear hazy, but they pull in to a point of focus that can be unexpected. In my paintings, I too enjoy playing with areas of un-clarity leading to surprising definition.

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<sup>10</sup>Sussman, Elisabeth. Nan Goldin : I'll Be Your Mirror. New York, NY. Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996





Her photos are raw, uncensored, and act as a documentary. They document not only her personal struggles but also those of her friends and lovers. Some of these struggles deal with sexuality or drug related issues, and touch upon the onslaught of AIDS as it became a frightening reality in the 80s. Though my work does not contain the same serious themes as Goldin's, I connect deeply with her desire to preserve memories and appreciate loved ones, even in their most imperfect or fragile states.

"My desire is to preserve the sense of people's lives, to endow them with the strength and beauty I see in them."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Goldin, Nan. The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. New York, NY. Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1986



### *The Miss Rockaway Armada*

The Miss Rockaway Armada is a group I have followed for the past few years. It is a collaborative group comprised of artist vagabonds whom construct traveling installations in the form of trash rafts, or floating sculptures. They are also known as Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea and the Swimming Cities of Serenissima. Miss Rockaway Armada and Switchback Sea sailed on the Mississippi (2006-2007) and the Hudson River (2008) respectively. The Swimming Cities of Serenissima was a fleet of boats that crashed the 2009 Venice Biennale. Their ideals center around, adventure, community, and innovative use of materials.



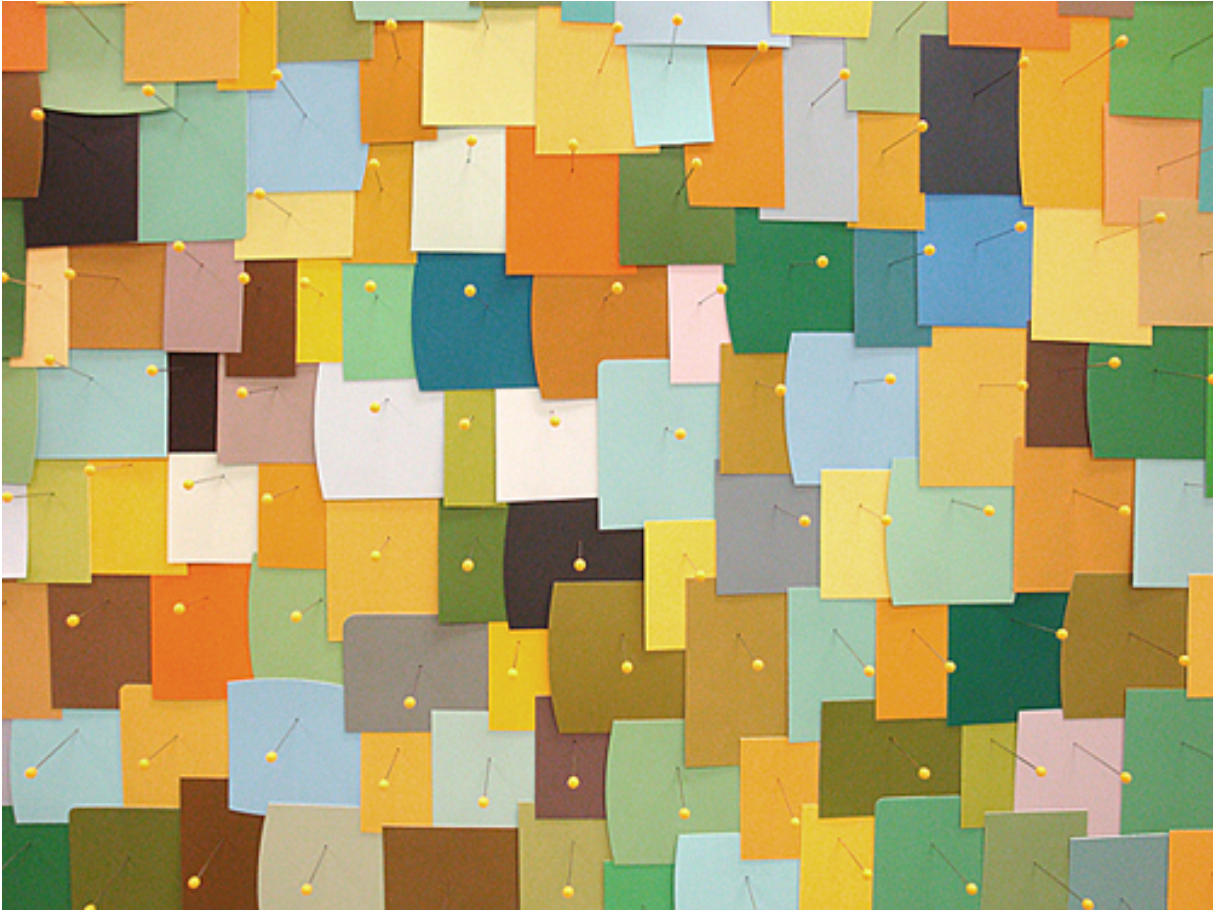
My first attraction to M.R.A. was based on their artist community lifestyle. I found myself enamored by the way these creative souls came together to pursue a shared vision. They are young artists like myself who have in one another found comfort, inspiration, support, and the joys of adventurous journeys. In a way, they have formed a new family unit. The junk rafts they create have interior spaces that are reinvented, decorated, and painted often using found objects and recycled material. Not only are they bonding together as they partake in this performance, but they have also created a moving household for this family group to travel together in. I feel there are shared aesthetics and desires between these young artists, this youthful family who vacations together on boats and pursues adventures, and myself. As they move and venture into new territory, they

continuously have their community and created environment with them. I wonder if this brings comfort to them, like my created household and family brings to me.



Color piecing and paneling is a reappearing theme in Miss Rockaway Armada's work that I find to be a shared and appreciated aesthetic. The colors, textures, character and choice of assemblage in combination with portraits I see as similar to my own pinned color installations.





I feel a deep connection to this group and the work they are doing. They are my peers who are looking backwards to their own personal histories while moving forward in creation and voyage.

### *BODY OF WORK*

My finished body of work existed in a warehouse gallery space that was transformed into a pseudo interior by constructing walls, which were then painted and paneled. The work hung on these prepared walls in a fashion similar to how a grandmother might lay out the pictures of her loved ones in her living room. Each family member receiving equal

attention, care and consideration in their placing.



When entering my thesis show installation, one could begin with the works Jim and Jean. Jim is an acrylic painting whose figure lay on a light blue background, and his youthful skin tone has been rendered in a peach hue. While his shoulders shrug low and to the right, and his body is positioned in the bottom right hand corner of the canvas, his view is directed towards the viewer. Immediately to his right is the cast iron bust Jean. She has been painted, rusted subtly and sits upon a grey crocheted blanket with an empty white

nametag. As with Jim, Jean also sits in the lower right hand corner of her panel of blanket and looks towards the viewer. The blanket is not centered with Jim's canvas, but instead, its bottom edge lines up with the bottom of Jim's canvas. Jean's face and shoulders tilts towards the left and to Jim. Together they lean in towards each other, but look out into the space.



At the end of this wall and to Jean's right is a color installation that grows out of the paneling and corner. It is a small piece, made of squares of color paper and yellow pins holding each individual color block to the wall. Its small interaction with this corner of the installation just begins to reflect the larger color piece directly across on the parallel wall. To its right is the painting Doris. She is a larger painting, but because the wood paneling

under her has been dropped down, the top of her canvas sits closely aligned with the top of Jim's canvas. Doris is a larger woman in stature, but her weight does not appear oppressive on the canvas; she is still light and translucent. The weight and solidity in this painting comes more from the heavy application of pale blue acrylic over green in the background. She exists in a broken and passing cloud of haze that is transferring over the solidness. Doris makes no effort to acknowledge the viewer, but instead looks to Jim & Jean and directs your eye to move to them as well.



Michael Glass sits on a shelf to Doris's right. His face has a soft complexion, subtle cast glass translucency and shaded wrinkles. His eyes look to the viewer, but his face is slightly turned to the right and to Doris. To his right sits the iron cast bust of Vern. All the figures to this point have referenced one another in either look or gesture, until Vern who looks directly forward with shoulders squared. He does not look to lead the viewer in the next direction, but instead stops the pattern of movement between

pieces and holds a point of focus in the center of the installation. Then a new pattern beings.





To Vern's right is Sue, who is cast iron and hangs on a grey blanket. Sue softly looks to the right and leads the viewer's eye to Ed who sits on a shelf facing away from her. Ed is a cast glass bust who like Michael Glass is softly translucent and quiet, sitting to the left on display shelf. Ed's view is directed at the viewer, but his body gestures one to look toward Michael, an iron bust on grey blanket to his right. Michael's shoulders are incomplete on the right, and round off to the left creating an arrow pointing back to Ed. The two figures are close to eye level with one



another, both looking out. To Michaels right and emerging from the joining corner is another color installation. The patterning and color choices made in the process of installing the color squares were part of an instinctive decision making process that allowed me to tap into natural selection of colors of my memories. I was able to combine colors together in a way harmonious to my personal history and to create a new kind of wallpaper for my space.



The color installation grew and crept towards the iron cast bust named Jimmy. Jimmy grins and looks to his left taking in both the color piece and adjoining wall filled with family members. His open mouth reveals teeth that are rotting out with rust and imperfections from the casting process. He is gleeful in his deteriorated and implacable state in this room. Jimmy sits back to back with Judy, a large acrylic painting of a woman fading into and emerging from a solid blue background. This solid color she sits



upon mimics the solid color squares found in the corner. Her eyes search out the viewer, but her body faces to the right. Departing from Judy and moving in this direction is John, a cast iron bust hanging on another grey blanket. His left shoulder is elongated and juts out towards Judy, his face looks to the following sculpture on his right, and his rusted eyes look out to the viewer. John is able connect with both pieces flanking him, and the viewer. Next sitting on a shelf, body turned towards John, is Jean Glass. Small and delicate in material and nature, Jean too acknowledges the viewer with her stare.



The final piece in the installation, Mike, is displayed to her right and mimics Jean's slightly profiled stance. He sits on top of a grey canvas, which like all the grey blankets, could almost begin to fade into the darker grey walls. His translucence is the most dramatic of all the paintings, and this combined with his confused, worried expression lets us know that he himself is not even sure of his state of being. Mike could almost dissipate back into a memory at any moment. All the work together in this environment supports one another and creates, through their body language and eye contact, a meaningful transition around the space. They are truly a family who needs one another and rely on one another as a unit. Most importantly, they make sure to acknowledge the viewer, and in my case, their loved one whom has brought them together.

## *CONCLUSION*

It found it difficult to exhibit my final thesis work; it was my safe place, not anyone else's. In my mind no one else could possibly understand what I was striving to create because it quite often makes little sense, even to me. Maybe others might find appreciation in the technical, or perhaps the conceptual aspects of the work, but they do not share my memories and desires. I ended up realizing that for others, I could only hope it became a different entity entirely: one that held just as much meaning for them as it does for me. I hope for the viewer there is potential for the symbolism of household and generational references to remind them of a time and place that they too have passed through in life. I hope this remembrance brings to them emotions that they have not felt since that time and place. In the faces of my loved ones, I am optimistic that there is room for the viewer to develop their own connection to the character of the figures, whether that is through finding humor in the imperfect awkwardness, or familiarity in the face. Each viewer's unique and personal experience with the symbolism and figural characteristics would then dictate what they are able to take away from my work. And because of this, there is potential for the work to have a multitude of meanings, ranging the gamut of emotions.

Through the course of completing my M.F.A. thesis work, I do not feel that I have gained complete understanding of what I have lost. Instead, during the process of creation and moments in the presence of the finished work, I successfully transported myself momentarily back to the places and presence of my loved ones. The work, in its final

installation form, became moments of portage, one space that held all the elements necessary to represent the time and the people mislaid.

Moving forward from this body of work, I intend to continue exploring the relationships of my past. The research methods I used were very beneficial to my artistic process and I plan on deeper exploration into their potential and ramifications. I would also like to further examine my methods for producing transient, translucent figures. Through the aid of additional technical practices, refined techniques, and new material experimentation I hope to find innovative and dynamic potentials for these concepts I am still digesting.

I believe, overall, the show became a place of comfort that I wish could have existed for a longer amount of time. Being in the space surrounded by my created family, colors, paneling, and blankets solidified a realm where these few simple elements combined to represent my foggy memories. But like my memories, this gallery experience was too fleeting. And that seems appropriate.

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*IMAGE USE WRITTEN PERMISSION*

Tod Seelie

Wednesday, February 3rd, 2010

Hey Erin,

Yeah, of course. No problem. Let me know if you need higher res versions (if you do, please send links to each image). Glad you think MRA is something worth writing about. I'm currently working on a book about the project comprised of crew member contributions, I'd be curious what you have to say about our project. Let me know if you would be willing to send me your writings, if you would like. Thanks.

--Tod Seelie

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Patricia Phelps

Saturday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010

I, Patricia Phelps, hereby grant permission to Erin Zellefrow to reproduce my family photograph in her Master of Fine Art thesis paper, *Family Mugs*.